

TRIBES OF THE USSIENT FOREST



This is the story the Ussient Tribes tell.

Before we were us, there was nothing here but waiting potential, the seeds of worlds -- how many, no one can say. In time, there came to be time, which at that time was also light, and both time and light were known as Wirtref.

Wirtref found the potential of worlds and ate some, and in that act ensured that they would never come to be. With that act, Wirtref created death, and had to give the part of herself that was time away to Death, who was named Moess.

Wirtref and Moess did not eat all the world-seeds, however. Many they buried for later, since there was now time unfolded from light and Wirtref knew that Moess would claim even her if she did not eat. But as time passed, Wirtref found Moess tiresome and they quarreled. With neither willing to relent, Wirtref at last agreed to separate that part of it which was light, and let that part illuminate their disagreement, deciding between them.

That part which was light became known as Sied, and it said they were both equally at fault. Unwilling to accept Sied's judgment, both went away. Sied sat in the sky and did nothing until one of the hidden seeds sprouted and became a world. It is our world.

The seed of the world brought forth many fruits, and the two greatest were humankind and the Ussient trees. The trees are great for their size and their value, envied by all other nations. Mankind's greatness lies in its boldness and its ability to grow, to become greater than it is.

In time, one of the people who lived amid the Ussient trees decided to go up to the sun and ask it all it had seen. Since, at that time, Seid was closer to the world than now, she was able to climb to the top of her tree and jump to the sun from there, though it was a long jump and dangerous.

Finding this human in his lap, Seid asked who she was and she said her name was Rusu. She asked him to tell her all he had seen, and Seid, who had long been lonely, did so. So charmed was the sun by Rusu's attention and curiosity and courage that he asked her to be his bride, but Rusu said no. Then the sun moved farther from the world, so that she could not return, and asked again. Again Rusu said no, and moreover accused him of violating hospitality. Seid replied that it was she who had violated his home by jumping on him uninvited and that this transgression put her person under his authority. (In the many years since his creation, Seid had become corrupted by loneliness and by watching all the ills of the world and its people.)

Worried, Rusu pretended to relent and said that her willing compliance would surely please him better than ongoing resistance. Seid asked how he could win her consent and the love he craved, and she said that first he must apologize. He did. Then he must promise never to do it again.

TRIBES OF THE VOSSIENT FOREST



With some hesitation he agreed. Finally, he had to agree to move closer to the world, for his distance had created a time of ice and the people were suffering.

Seid refused, fearing that she would simply jump away when she had the chance. She, in turn, said she could never love him if he could not trust her, and he replied that she could ask anything else. So Rusu asked for his power of light and warmth, so that she might send it to the people below. Reluctantly, Seid agreed. But Seid had never known himself without the light and the heat, and he quickly became chilled and cried out in the darkness. He begged for the return of his light, but Rusu refused and, seeing his weakness, drove him from the heavens. Frozen Seid crashed to the sea far to the north and west, which is why those lands are always cold.

As for Rusu, she was the first human to become a goddess. She tried to return home and show her people the secrets of light and warmth, but try as she might, no matter how she damped her flame she could not keep it contained. Causing disasters and forest fires, Rusu saw there was no longer any place for her in the world. Sorrowing, she returned to the sky and set herself far from the forest, where she would never have to look upon frozen Seid again. She still practices her dimming and cooling nightly, and every winter she longs to return to the world of her birth, but inevitably her inner fire returns in the spring, leaving her trapped out of reach.

As for Seid, some say Moess came and consumed him before falling to the blade of Nictus, the Man Who Became Death. But others say Seid still waits in the frozen wastes, plotting his revenge on Rusu and on the race that spawned her.



OVERVIEW AND VALUES

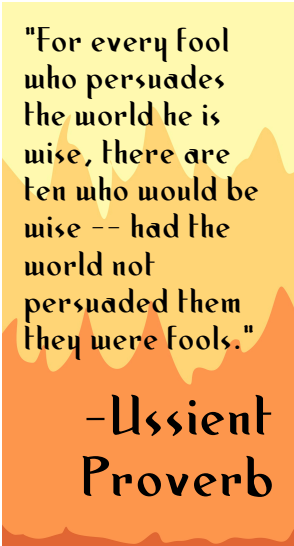


The massive trees of the Ussient forest are sparsely populated by insular tribes, each typically claiming a single tree as its vertical domain. These tribes, while less mechanically or culturally sophisticated than their neighbors to the north or the south, necessarily have a healthy rate of magical study. Their dominant local magic form mimics the qualities of fire, often to the near-exclusion of fire itself. Warming oneself with magic is far safer than fire, when one's whole world is wooden.

VALUES

The Ussient tribes value ambition and personal excellence, but also loyalty to their home tribe. To be Ussient is to be expected to work hard and pursue the greatest heights of whatever skill,

duty or profession one picks. The only segment of society immune to this pressure are the groundlings who live around the base of the tree, growing crops and tending gardens. To leave the high-pressure life on the trunk for "a muddy life watching corn grow" is seen as a disgraceful surrender by most Ussient tribesmen, and this contempt for farmers remains unabated when they travel abroad.



"For every fool who persuades the world he is wise, there are ten who would be wise -- had the world not persuaded them they were fools."

—Ussient
Proverb

RELIGION AND AMBITION

The Ussient tribes worship a pantheon that varies somewhat from tree to tree, but the universal feature of their deities is that they were all, previously, human. To an Ussient, foreign religions often seem to be based on the questionable premise that inhuman entities have any interest in worship from mankind. Instead, they believe that humans of exceptional accomplishment may, with enough luck and courage, supplant the original gods (as Rusu did with Seid) or kill them outright to usurp their position (as the conqueror Nictus did to the original death-god Moess, becoming the god of death and warfare). With sufficient excellence, any mortal can become immortal and demand the respect of all the dwellers in the forest. Thus they believe that their history's greatest magician became the goddess of magic and their greatest climber became the god of ascent (to whom one prays for the strength to one day become immortal oneself).

A byproduct of this belief is a limited respect for the aged. All the ascended gods achieved their greatness before the age of thirty summers, and many other great Ussient who failed to surpass death were killed before that age. Thus, if you live to be gray haired, it must be because you were too lazy to become immortal when young, or because you never accomplished enough to spur someone into killing you.

CULTURE



CULTURE

The Ussient trees keep their history in the form of epic chants, with literacy only recently leading to written (or carved) records. These lengthy, superlative-laced, heavily internally-rhymed stories give their form to reports of current events and future predictions. When an Ussient wants to make a name for herself through some daring exploit, she typically announces it beforehand in a public, rhymed boast of what she's going to go do. If she succeeds, she modifies the song to reflect that it happened and that version is, thereafter, accepted as fact. If she fails, there's some good-natured teasing and, if her brag-song was particularly good, it may still get sung in a sort of wistful and ironic way to recognize her at later occasions in her life. On the other hand, if she backs out of her dare due to cowardice, she is shunned and disgraced.

The Ussient songs are often backed by woodwinds, drums and hammered wooden chimes similar to marimbas. Often these instruments are works of art even when silent, for the Ussient are unparalleled woodcarvers.

Their carvings often exaggerate and stylize the features found in nature, so that the mouths and eyes of their portraits of great leaders are three or four times larger (or more) than any such feature found on a normal human. There is a subtle vocabulary to the patterns used to emphasize features and details:

Each ascended god has a simple shape associated with him or her. Including Nictus' pattern on a statue indicates that the person portrayed was a warrior, or died in a war, or had some other close and important association with death.

CUISINE

Some farming occurs on the ground around the trunks, grains and corn where there's sufficient light, salad greens and large mushrooms elsewhere. Ranching and herding have never caught on, since the terrain simply won't support it.

The dietary staple is the Ussient fruit, which is as vastly scaled as everything else about the trees. These boulder-sized fruits are completely edible, though the skin is bitter and is more often tanned for clothing than consumption. The flesh rots from the outside in, so that one fruit can be eaten off of for a month or two once the skin is pierced. As for the seed at the core, if cooked it pops like popcorn and provides an oily, robust treat.

The third leg of the Ussient diet is hunting and scavenging. Birds, large and small, are snared with nets or shot with arrows (often tethered). Nests are raided for eggs, some of which can be of great size. While nothing in the forest is the size of a biauchrus, some of the birds of prey can weigh as much as a grown man and, if unable to carry him, are more than capable of knocking an egg-thief over the side of a branch.

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There are also squirrels, snakes of all sizes and the squirrel's massive relative, the *cruscius*. While squirrel-shaped, they typically weigh as much as a human adult. There are packs of carnivorous monkeys to hunt and eat (if you're desperate -- they're quite tough and taste rotten even when fresh). Food that doesn't run away is also available in the form of edible molds and fungi on the dark sides of the trees, but they're an acquired taste -- some are poisonous, so pick carefully.

CLOTHES

Clothes indicate social status and can subtly indicate beliefs. The lower one is on the tree, the more likely one is to wear *ucrim*, the leather of the Ussient fruit. The more prosperous peoples living higher in the branches are likely to supplement *ucrim* with imported foreign fabrics like cowhide or

pigskin, cotton, wool or (very rarely) silk. At the highest branches, where the leaders and the bold dwell, foreign trifles are shunned, but status is displayed through feathers, snakeskin, or fur and leather from the *cruscius*.



The shape of these clothes is almost always pants and a long-sleeved shirt, with shoes optional among any but the groundlings. These garments are laced along the sides to keep a tight fit. As a matter of practicality, clothes worn in the trees need to offer as much freedom of movement as

possible, but close garb keeps out of the way when one has to move. The exception to this are the top-tier dwellers who wear less practical clothing as a silent boast about their physical prowess. Up there one may find short capes,

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feather ruffs that spread behind the head, colored fringes and elaborate headwear.

While not as sanguine about personal nudity as the Deerwood culture, the Ussients see less shame in bare flesh than (say) the Truils. Nakedness is often an enhancing factor for competitive endeavors. Racing to the top of the tree is an adequate contest. Challenging someone to race naked ups the ante.

Jewels and gold are regarded as curiosities, pretty but with no inherent use (other than trading with foreigners, of course). This indifference to the wealth of the earth (which the Ussient forest largely lacks, not that one could mine it easily) endears them to their northern Ironbone neighbors. They're more likely to adorn themselves with jewelry made of wood, which is lighter, easier to replace and more meaningful.

Wearing the wood of your home tree is worthy. Wearing the wood of an allied tribe is fine, though it shows a close connection to that foreign tree. Wearing the wood of a rival is only permissible if it was taken as a trophy, either won in a wager or claimed as war-booty.



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ECONOMY



Trading between tribes is limited, as most of them have the same resources and a lean season for one is the same for all. A more prosperous tree with better light for its groundling farmers may sell an excess to neighbors, but by and large the trees are self-sufficient. They have to be.

Instead of raw materials, then, most trade is conducted for crafts. For example, the tree Ugust grows in clay soil near a great river. While it is stunted compared to many in the forest, its potters are the finest in the region and often trade their wares for fruit to supplement their diets. Another tribe, on tree Siess, is several days' journey along ground paths (or through uninhabited trees) from its inhabited neighbors, but Siess lies near trade routes to Dindavara and the northlands. They are therefore able to trade to travelers for metal implements, which they then exchange with Ugust and other tribes. Many trees have specialized or unique assets of this type, and they form the basis of their economies.

Trees that don't have such benefits often resort to raiding. Stealing from someone within your own tribe is a shameful thing, unless he's your recognized rival and you bragged about how you were going to rip him off beforehand. But taking stuff from other tribes -- raiding, as opposed to stealing -- is honorable and a fine way to gain social status. Excessive raiding of one tree on another is looked at askance and may lead to more severe

reprisals, but light robbery is considered the price of doing business, like a soft tax. When raiding one another, Ussient tribes often rely only on lashes, blunt arrows, and clubs. While enduring a heavy beating to protect your property is highly esteemed -- indeed, Ussient bandits have been known to beat people unconscious and then leave them their goods intact as a sign of respect -- it's also understood that some people are going to take a lick or two and then quit, without any particular shame. Thus, Ussient raids are almost universally conducted without fatalities. Deadly weapons are only brought out when one is interfering on their close property. Some trees don't even consider their groundlings worth defending with lethal force.

POLITICS



The Ussient prize valor, exalt conflict, and offer regular praise to Nictus, their god of death and warfare. So it's shocking, really, how stable and peaceful the tribe and nation are, on the whole.

The Dindavarans have tried to take Ussient trees in the past, but crossing the Grave of Fools is a good way to diminish your army. Fighting a vertical war against people who are used to it is another. It's a tribute to their determination, and to the tireless Burai soldiers who distinguished themselves in the forest fight, that they forced three tribes to abandon their home trees and flee deeper into the groves. But what the invaders took, they could not hold. They had not the climbing skill nor the inclination to patrol the far branches, and with those ceded to the displaced tribes (and to many other Ussient who came to try themselves against the strange foreigners) the harassment drove them out. A similar history against an Ironbone incursion secures their northern flank. As for the Mountain Rider Truils, they've no interest in seizing tree-cities their mounts can't climb.

Tribe on tribe rivalry, conflict, and violence are common. In fact, they're so common they've become culturally encoded and ritualized. The tribes fight like brothers -- viciously, with long-held grudges and incessant picking at perceived weakness, but with no real desire to kill. Raiding, robbery, duels and

THE GRAVE OF FOOLS

The Ussients' preferred trading partners are the Truils. Despite the distance separating them, there is great demand in the Truil wastes for Ussient fire talismans, while the tree-dwellers can never get enough of the Truil's hornbows and their drug Kratig, which the Ussient refer to as "the Taste of the Hero."

Prices for these commodities are driven through the roof by the trade route one must follow between the Truil Wastes and the Ussient forest. The route starts with the dark forest, Ussients that never fruit for lack of light, cursed trees where no human dwells and the cruscious have no fear of man. After that, the route lies across a plain the Truils call the Cold Barrens. Considering what the entire Truil Waste is like, it should tell you something that they single out this plain as *particularly* cold and *singularly* lifeless.

The most commonly copied map of the area was laid out by an Ironbones explorer and evangelist who wound up lining the bellies of a Blue Face tribe after passing through Mountain Rider territory with a rapidly-dwindling party. His map was traded to Dindavara, where it was translated into Dindavaran and copied. On that map, the uninhabited plains lying between Ussient, Truil and Dindavaran terrain is labeled, "The Grave of Fools."

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mockery are common. Deaths from fights, especially from falls on moving tree limbs, are accepted. Deliberate fighting to kill? That's a story that's going to carry.

TRIBALISM

Your tree is your tribe, to which you owe primary loyalty. Betraying your brother for the good of the tribe is low, but not nearly as low as betraying your tribe for your brother. Marrying between tribes is common and accepted, usually to cement a trade or political alliance. In such deals, one family typically makes the more generous concessions, while the other family sends their child (son or daughter, it matters not) to live on the other tree. Such people are regarded as members of the tribe, but always with a little suspicion -- or a little extra patience.

Governance begins informally, but grows a level of ritual continuity towards the top. People who successfully complete impressive brags gradually move higher on the tree. If their new neighbors accept them, they've ascended in social class. If they're rejected, scorned, mocked and have garbage thrown at them, they crawl back down in disgrace, often lower than they started. But if the higher-ups reject someone popular with the lower-downs, they risk their own position. Higher-ups gain and maintain status by solving problems humbly brought to them by lower-downs. Someone at the top branch who is never asked to mediate a dispute, punish a criminal, solve a mystery or

undertake a daring journey is someone whose time has passed. They become irrelevant and forgotten which is, for an Ussient, the greatest disgrace.

Many problems, then, are solved by appealing to a higher-status Ussient (and offering a generous tribute in recompense). Among the highest Ussient tribesmen there are official duties with ornate regalia, ceremonies, rituals and prerequisites. The particular offices vary from tribe to tribe, but the most common include High Priest, Supreme Judge, or Warlord. Which office truly leads the tribe depends, in equal parts, on the charisma and cunning of the office-holder, and on the historical importance that tribe has habitually given to religion, judgment, or martial prowess.

RELIGIOUS POWER

Taking an extremely optimistic view of the perfectibility of humankind, Ussient worship has an almost collegial tone, rather than the awed and adoring approach common almost everywhere else. Every Ussient has fantasized about becoming divine, if not actually planned on or attempted it. While brags and daring exploits generate immediate social currency, they're also considered a potent religious tool. The gods are powerful and can subtly or directly influence the world to protect and reward those who praise and entertain them.

Priesthoods, then, are those who claim to have hidden knowledge of what their god or goddess likes. Those who are

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permitted to join (admitted due to family connection, status, or lavish offerings) are tutored in the best ways to please their goddess or god, and what the deity's goals among mortals are. Moreover, each priesthood has a body of secret lore about their patron's mortal life, which is considered essential for understanding which sacrifices please, what heroism impresses, and what jokes amuse the ascended mortal.

Naturally, priests of Nictus value deeds of arms and attract warlike supplicants. The goddess of sorcery has followers who prefer study and prize inner

strength. Rusu the Sun Goddess' religion stresses athleticism, cunning and mastery of fire -- not just magically mimicked flame, but the real thing, dangerous and natural. Each tries to please their patron through deeds of greatness done in their names. Often these brags, quests and dares are performed upon local rival temples and religious persons, rather than against other tribes' churches. In at least two cases, religious tensions within a tribe have escalated to deadly warfare that left their tribes all but vassals to neighboring trees.

"I was greeted by a woman of ghastly aspect, scarred more hideous than any battle-veteran, her very flesh warped and run like a river's frozen rapids. I was given to understand that she had got thus of her own will, but my grasp of these brutes' tongue is yet imperfect. I believe they said she had sung a song, an ancient boast, that she would give herself over to fire for their sun-saint. By this she became their priestess. While appalled by such barbarity in pursuit of a false faith, I could not help but admire her courage, mad or misguided as it might be. I have fought five duels, two unto death, and walked into each with steady hand. But when this fire-priestess met my gaze, I shook."

- Rutan Xingshao, Dindavaran explorer and diplomat

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THE SHADE SOCIETIES

The open route to power in the great trees is through fame and renown, but not everyone's skills and temperament fit them to the arrogance of public greatness. For the subtle, the shy and the devious, there is another route to influence, rarely discussed but all the stronger for it.

Almost every inhabited tree has a Shade Society, a group who meet in secrecy, act in darkness, and protect their view of the social ideal through any means they deem fit. They are self-appointed bogeymen, silently watching for those who break their unspoken laws. Those who step out of line may get a warning, or they may get poisoned and thrown off-branch in the middle of the night.

To some, particularly the groundlings, Shade Societies are admired as protectors of the humble. To others, usually those with a view towards changing their tribal society, the Shade Societies are self-righteous and retrograde vigilantes, afraid of the future and hiding behind anonymity.

These conspiracies add members through invitation only. Often they hoard secret knowledge, particularly knowledge of spells that help them keep their tribe in line. Some are little more than unofficial clubs where the influential meet to privately discuss their use of soft power. Others are regimented cabals where each member knows only four others at most. Still others have layers of secrets and

initiations, leading (in at least one case) to hidden worship of Seid the Fallen Sun.

Whatever their nature, the Shade Societies are hardly ever discussed among the tribesmen, and *never* to outsiders. This made it quite puzzling to one Ironbone envoy who had become fast friends with an up-and-coming young sorceress. The enchantress was cheerful, confident and energetic until the day she found a small leather packet slipped in among her belongings. Inside it was an animal claw and a quantity of red dust. When she first saw it, she turned pale. She left him with no explanation. Four hours later, she went to the edge of a branch with several of her family members, apologized to them, and hung herself.

No one would even talk to the Ironbone priest after that. The Sisterhood of Claw and Dust was mollified and did not expand its vendetta.

WARFARE



General Stead's famous pyramid has bulk troops, elite warriors and potent sorcerers as its three corners, each favored against one of the others. The Ussients are passably armed with enchantment: Their local magic is easily adapted to warfare and it's widely known. As for elite individuals, their entire culture urges people to become commanding leaders with unparalleled skills and total self-confidence. There are warriors and adventurers who are better trained, but it's hard to find anyone more eager for a life of intense, total conflict outside the Lightless Jungle or the mad ranks of a Sunless poleaxe regiment. Moreover, the Ussient god-chasers are *cheerful* about it.

The forest falls short of massy numbers. Compared to fruitful plains like Green River or Center, the food density of the Ussient forest is far lower and, accordingly, the population is much less. On the other hand, the forest is an almost perfect terrain to negate the advantage of numbers.

As mentioned back on page xx., conflict between tribes is formalized and, while violent, is almost never indiscriminately so. The people acting out against rivals are ambitious and eager for their individual honor, and there's no honor in slaughtering civilians, nor any real

tactical advantage. Even if a tribe had the will to mobilize many of its adults into an army, they'd face the problem of actually getting to the heart of an enemy tree. It's the same problem that has stymied foreign invaders, because there are really only two options.

First, they can go along the ground and seize the enemy's lowest holdings. This cuts the food supplies of

the tree-dwellers, but only in the long term, and besieging an Ussient tree isn't easy. Trapping enemy forces above the groundling level is fairly simple, as there are usually few ramps and ascents, but the same choke points that make it easy to keep them *in* makes it easy for them to keep you *out*. Eventually the loss of food from the ground farms can become telling, but unless the invader also closes



WARFARE



down the trade routes where the target's branches touch those of other trees, the defenders can break the blockade with long-lasting Ussient fruit. Moreover, taking the low road puts you under your enemy. A low-lying branch from an Ussient tree can stretch ten horizontal miles. If any part of your army is under it, they're vulnerable to arrows, fire, weighted spears and anything else the people upstairs can lay hands on.

The other alternative is to attack along a branch, fighting from tree to tree. The problem here is that you either have to split your forces between several branches (which is a logistical nightmare and requires magnificent leadership to yield a coordinated strike) or concentrate on one branch and face a horrible bottleneck with only a tiny percentage of your troops fighting at any time. If your troops are outsiders unaccustomed to doing battle high up in the air, on a platform that may be oh-so-slightly moving, and they're facing hit-and-run raids from people who know every inch of the terrain and have spent decades tunneling through the bark, it's much, much worse.

But while the Ussients are superb on defense, and can raid each other in a way that's culturally meaningful but never economically disastrous, they can't expand beyond the forest. They just don't have the numbers, the metal supplies or the know-how to take even a single Confederate or Ironbone city.

USSIENT NAMES

Male	Female
Crike	Edebe
Dram	Irstro
Ecstron	Ivis
Eiss	Luss
Nissed	Moni
Nonik	Noss
Refran	Schomi
Taive	Subuco
Talt	Rusu
Tatch	Runick
Vessen	Ussus
Vurvie	Utura

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Ussient Character Concepts

...fire mimicker, recently returned from a rich and hazardous trade expedition with the Truils...

...shy but brilliant musician, blackmailing the famed heroes whose brags she, in fact, composed...

...widow who married for love and moved to a new tree, only to have her husband murdered by the local Shade Society...

...athlete who hears messages from Rusu when he dreams during the winter months...

...groundling who secretly cleaves to the Ironbone faith and spies for the Theocracy...

Ussient Company Concepts

...war-priests infuriated by social laxity and decaying morals.

...Shade Society conducting a long-term clandestine campaign against a putative ally.

...revolutionary conspiracy masquerading as an ancient Shade Society.

...followers of a brilliant speaker and idea-man who must deal with the dirty realities their master ignores.

...fed-up groundlings ready to revolt.

Ussient Plot Complications

...the trees are getting sick. Can an Imperial wood-sorcerer save them, or an Ob-lob oracle see a solution, or does an answer lie in the legendary Library of Salck?

...dozens of Ironbone priests are flooding the forest. They're on the losing side of a political fight and have been effectively exiled.

...a mixed band of Truil refugees has moved into an uninhabited tree near the Cold Barrens. Should they be expelled, aided or traded with?

...an Ussient tree, dead for centuries, falls and sets off tremors that collapse buildings and drop unripe fruit from other Ussients. Are the rumors that it was bored through by demons accurate? Are there resources to scavenge from it? What about the closest trees, most damaged by the disaster? Aid them... or conquer them?

...the Confederacy invades.